

Lions, Bears, and the First Thanksgiving

By Doug Warren

Detroit sports fans have always been tough on their teams and their players. When their teams win, they come out in droves. Conversely, when their teams lose, the result usually means an additional loss for the team at the box office. However, while Detroit sports fans are tough, they are also loyal. That toughness and loyalty comes from the blue collar mid-western work ethic that is embedded in much of the fan base. While their teams may not always win, they know, and appreciate an honest effort when they see one. Therefore, when a team or individual player comes along that embodies that lunchpail mentality, Detroit fans embrace them.

No other team in Detroit sports history symbolizes that loyalty more than the Detroit Lions. In the 45 years since the Lions last won the NFL championship in 1957, they have finished at, or above, the .500 mark 17 times. Of those 17 times, 13 have been second place finishes in their division. However, only 2 of those 13 second place finishes have resulted in a playoff berth. To say that the Lions' championship drought has been a case of "close but no cigar," would be an overstatement.

So why have Lion fans remained so loyal for so long? How and when was that bond created? There is little debate that the bond between the Lions and their fans was set in stone during the Bobby Layne led halcyon days of the 1950's. However, the foundation for the bond was set by the very first Lions team back in their inaugural season of 1934. In the midst of this country's Great Depression, that first Lions squad went to work in the Motor City. In doing so, they stormed out of the gates to establish what remains the most dominating stretch of games any Lion team has ever produced.

The Lions opened up their first season in Detroit with the nucleus of their 1933 Portsmouth roster intact. Coach Patsy Clark's Spartan mainstays included, single wing tailback Glenn Presnell; halfback Leroy "Ace" Gutowsky; guard Gover "Ox" Emerson; tackle George "Tarzan" Christiansen; wingback Ernie Caddel; blocking back Roy "Father" Lumpkin; and ends Bill McKalip and Harry Ebding.

However, the biggest piece of the puzzle was the return of Earl "Dutch" Clark, from his one year NFL hiatus as athletic director and coach at Colorado School of Mines. With Dutch back in the fold, it was clear that the new Lion franchise had the talent to compete with the Chicago Bears and the Green Bay Packers for Western Division supremacy.

The Lions opened up their first season on September 23, 1934, hosting the defending Eastern Division champion New York Giants at the 25,000 seat University of Detroit Stadium. Before a disappointing crowd of only 12,000, the Lions shutout the Giants 9-0. The game was highlighted by a 20-yard Dutch Clark drop-kick, and a Father Lumpkin 45-yard interception return. Week two saw Clark score on a six-yard run as the Lions prevailed with a second shutout, 6-0 over the Cardinals in Chicago. The Lions would win another nailbiter the following week in Green Bay by a 3-0 tally.

The winning margin was provided by the leg of Glenn Presnell. With help from the steady placement of holder Ace Gutowsky, the kick covered 54 yards, and became a NFL record that stood for 19 years. The record setting attempt came almost by accident as the Lions, nearing the end of the first half, faced a punting situation on Green Bay's 49 yard line.

Presnell, in a recent interview, still remembers that kick like it was yesterday: "It was just about the end of the first half . . . so one the boys said, 'Why don't you try a field goal?' It was just as good as a punt from that spot, and of course it carried through the uprights."

The Lions continued their winning ways with a 10-0 decision over the Eagles in Philadelphia, and a 24-0 scalping of the Boston Redskins, at the U-of-D, on October 17th. Next, came a 21-point day by Dutch Clark, as the Lions pasted the Brooklyn Dodgers 28-0.

The highlight for the home rooters came on a 72-yard Dutch scamper to paydirt. The Lions record stood at 6-0 when they made a triumphant return to Portsmouth, Ohio, on October 28th, to face the forces of the Cincinnati Reds football squads. The Reds were no match as the Lions posted another dominating shutout, 38-0. The 4,800 Portsmouth faithful on hand witnessed Dutch Clark ramble for 194 yards in his return to his former Spartan home.

When the Lions left Portsmouth for Detroit, to open up a five game home stand beginning with Art Rooney's Pittsburgh Pirates on November 4, they had not given up a single point in their first seven games. No opponent had even crossed the Lions' 22 yard line during the incredible stretch, as the Lions compiled 118 points of their own.

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However, the shutout streak came to an end against the aforementioned, and lowly, Pirates when the Swashbucklers scored their lone touchdown on a 62-yard punt return by Joe Skladany, which was set up by a trans-continental-cross-field lateral from punt-fielder Harp Vaughn. It was the only time all day that the Pirates crossed midfield as the Lions' singlewing ground attack racked up 426 yards in a 40-7 triumph. Curiously, only 6,000 fans had shown up to see the Lions set the team's single game rushing mark that still stands today.

The winning streak remained intact however, and the Lions stretched it to a then-NFL record-tying 10 games with victories over the Chicago Cardinals 17-13, and another 40-7 over the St. Louis Gunners, a team that replaced the Reds when Cincinnati dropped out at mid-season, respectively.

So when Curly Lambeau and his always formidable Green Bay Packers rolled into Detroit for their rematch scheduled for Sunday, November 25, the Detroit Lions stood tied with the Chicago Bears atop the NFL's Western Division. The Lions and Bears possessed identical 10-0 records, with three games to play. Both teams knew that their collective destinies were in each other's hands, because in the season's final two weeks, they would face each other in a home-and-home series that would decide the Western Division championship.

However, the Lions still had the Packers to contend with, and after that hard fought 3-0 loss back in October, the Pack was bent on revenge. The rematch proved to be another defensive struggle, and Lambeau's boys served up the payback. The final score was once again 3-0, with the winning Packer points coming from future Hall of Famer Clarke Hinkle's 47-yard field goal. Because of the tough Packer defeat, the Lions would have to go into the final two contests versus the Bears trailing their arch rivals by a game. The Bears remained undefeated at 11-0, while the Lions now stood at 10-1.

When the Monsters of the Midway came into the University of Detroit Stadium to face the Lions on Thanksgiving Day, November 29, 1934, no one had any idea that Detroit was starting a tradition. The game was the brainchild of Lion owner George A. Richards. Being the owner of Detroit radio station WJR, Richards had contacts in the booming radio industry.

He used those contacts to garner the help of NBC Radio president Deke Aylesworth in setting up a 94-station network to broadcast the Lion-Bear tussle live coast-to-coast.

Richards felt that the game would give pro football excellent exposure. When Papa Bear George Halas agreed, the game was on, and both squads proved more than ready to spoil the other teams' Thanksgiving dinner.

The Lions first ever sellout crowd of 26,000 witnessed one of the great games in team history on that landmark day. Detroit got the early lead in the first quarter on a two-yard Ace Gutowsky TD run that was set up by a Buster Mitchell 27-yard interception return. Dutch Clark provided the PAT.

The Bears answered back to tie the game in the second stanza with a 14 yard TD strike from Keith Molesworth-to-Eugene Ronzani, with Bronko Nagurski adding the PAT. The Lions responded with nine more points before the half. They came from a Gutowsky one-yard plunge, (the point after was blocked) and a 34-yard boot by Presnell. The Bears cut the Lion lead to 16-13 in the third quarter when Jack Manders kicked field goals of 15 and 42 yards.

The game remained there until late in the final period, when a Glenn Presnell pass was intercepted by Joe Zeller, who brought it back to the Detroit 4-yard line. Two plays later, the Bears scored on a play that was all too familiar to the Lions, a two-yard Nagurski flea flicker. However, instead of Red Grange on the receiving end, as was the case in the 1932 Bear-Spartan playoff, this pass went to another future Bear Hall of Famer, Bill Hewitt. A desperate Clark led a final drive that fell short, and the Bears prevailed 19-16.

In describing the loss, Leo Macdonell of the Detroit *Times* wrote, "It was a heartbreak for the Lions and their followers, and with a heavy heart they feasted over the crumbs of a game that put the Detroit team out of the running for the championship honors."

Times sports editor Bud Shaver added that, "Many Thanksgiving Days will roll into eternity before 26,000 Detroiters will forget that one in which the Chicago Bears knocked the Detroit Lions out of a chance for the National Football League Championship at U-D Stadium."

The Lions would give another stellar effort in their regular season finale the next week at Wrigley Field, but would fall to the Bears for the 5th straight time, 10 to 7.

Nevertheless, even with their disappointing finish, their inaugural season in the Motor City had to be considered a success. Over the course of the season, they had outscored their opponents 238-59, and their three losses had been by a combined total of nine points. Dutch Clark had finished second in the NFL in scoring (73 points), third in rushing (763 yards), and 4th in passing (383 yards). His tailback partner Glenn Presnell, finished third in the league scoring race behind Dutch with 63 points. In addition

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to their defense giving up only 59 points all year, they allowed only two rushing touchdowns, and five passing touchdowns total. They also led the league with 33 interceptions. Top that off with the incredible shutout streak and 10-0 start, there was little concern that these Lions would suffer the same slip into oblivion like previous Detroit franchises.

Detroit has always been a blue-collar city, and those 1934 Lions played a rugged, hard-nosed, blue-collar brand of football that symbolized the spirit of the city they represented. Their effort against the mighty Bears that first Thanksgiving solidified their place in the hearts of Detroit sports fans, alongside the already established Tigers and Red Wings. In addition, the Lion's first Thanksgiving Day game proved to be such a success, both on the field and at the box office, that it became an annual event. Nearly seventy-years later, it has become as big a part of America's Thanksgiving as the turkey and pumpkin pie.